

Seven Tips on How to Study for the UIL A+ Academics Chess Puzzles

by Al Lawrence

Director, Texas Tech Chess Program

The Texas Tech Chess crew enjoys the challenge of putting together the UIL's A+ Academics Chess Puzzles test. We've received a number of inquiries about how students can prepare for the tests. There's a lot you can do in a relatively short time to improve student scores.

First of all, it's important to keep in mind that, although some of the puzzles ask the student to solve a checkmate problem, there are many other types of chess puzzles on the test. The puzzles test knowledge of all the chess rules. Playing skill is also tested, sometimes challenging the student to choose the best move in a position.

Each main test consists of 20 puzzles (chess diagrams). Below each puzzle are four possible multiple-choice answers, a-d, to choose from. Students mark their answers on a separate answer sheet.

Let's go through some tips about *what a student needs to know*. We'll give some online resources for study. In early November, we'll provide some sample questions on these topics to check your progress. In the meantime, you can also see the UIL practice tests and puzzles online at the Texas Tech Chess Program website:

<http://www.depts.ttu.edu/ttuchess/>

1. Know how to read chess moves!

The puzzles are diagrams that look like little chessboards. But to choose the right answer from the multiple choices below the diagrams, you have to be able to read chess moves!

Experienced chess players can write down their games. And they can read chess books and articles about chess because there is a method to write down moves. It is called "algebraic notation." (But it is easier to learn than its name!) It's a simple, two-part system that's a lot like reading a map.

- Each square on the board has an "address" that's easy to find from the "grid" around the diagram.
- Every piece is given a symbol. (We make it even easier by using the outline of the piece.)

To study how to read and write chess, go online to these sites:

https://www.uschess.org/docs/forms/KeepingScore_2007.pdf

http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Chess/Algebraic_notation

We use "figurine algebraic" on the quiz to keep it simple. In the online resource, don't worry about "computer algebraic" or "descriptive notation," unless you're interested.

2. Know ALL the piece moves!

Of course, this means knowing how the king, queen, bishop, knight, rook, and pawn move. But it also means knowing the “special moves” of chess:

Castling (both kingside and queenside)

Promotion

En Passant

Know the rules about when it’s legal and illegal to castle! One example— you can’t castle if doing so would move your king through a square controlled by an enemy piece. Also, pawn promotion is sometimes misunderstood, although the idea is simple—if a pawn gets all the way to the other side of the board, it can be promoted to any piece other than a king. (Yes, you can have two or more queens, or three knights or more, etc.) *En Passant*, a pawn-move option legal under certain conditions, is the most misunderstood (or even unknown!) rule in chess. The phrase is French for “in passing.” To find a pawn capture or even a possible checkmate, you may have to know this rule.

To learn how the pieces move, including all the special rules! Go online to:

<http://www.uschess.org/content/view/7324/28/>

3. Know the difference between check, checkmate, and stalemate!

Checkmate is of course the goal of chess. If a king is in check and can’t get out of check, it’s checkmate. Game over. The side with the checkmated king loses. On the other hand, a simple *check* can be a good move or bad. It’s simply an attack on the enemy king that can be escaped. Keep in mind that *stalemates* result in a drawn game! If it’s your move but you have no legal moves—and you’re *not* in check—you’re in stalemate!

There are many online sources about check, checkmate, and stalemate:

Here’s a good one about checkmate:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Checkmate>

Here’s a good one about stalemate:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stalemate>

Here’s one that covers check, checkmate, and stalemate:

http://www.thechessdrum.net/chessacademy/CA_Checkmate.html

4. Know the material values for the chess pieces and be able to calculate “who’s ahead”!

You should know that a queen is worth more than a rook so that you know when to trade and when not to. But is a queen worth more than two rooks? Not generally. Below are the piece values most often given to guide a beginner. Be able to answer the question “Who’s ahead in material, Black or White?”

queen = 9

rook = 5

bishop = 3

knight = 3

pawn = 1

The king is not given a point-value because it is infinitely valuable.

Here's an online resource:

<http://www.chesscorner.com/tutorial/basic/capture/capture.htm>

5. Know the “rule of the square.”

Since many games are won by promoting a pawn to a queen, you must know when a king can catch any enemy pawn before it reaches the last rank!

Here's an online resource:

<http://www.chess.com/blog/ValeRock/endgame---the-pawn-square-rule>

6. Know the ideas of basic chess tactics!

There are tactical ideas that win most chess games. The most common are *double attack*, *pin*, and *skewer*. Know the ideas behind these three basic tactics and be able to apply them.

Here's a good online source for the basic tactics used on the quiz. Be sure to page through all four—*en prise* (this fancy phrase just means an undefended piece), fork (the same thing as double attack), pin, and skewer!

<http://chess.about.com/od/tipsforbeginners/ss/BasicTactics.htm>

7. Know what “best play” means!

Some puzzles may ask you if White can force checkmate or the win of a piece with best play. “Best play” means that each side makes its very best moves. So if one side can checkmate or win a piece by best play, there is no escape! Sometime this idea is called “forced” play—for example, in the question “How can White win a piece by force?”

If you study and can demonstrate your knowledge of these seven building blocks of chess, you'll not only score well on the UIL Chess Puzzles—you'll also be a good chess player!

You can find lots of other online resources by a simple online search for what you want to study—for example, “chess castling.” If you find resources you especially like on any of the topics above, please let us know about them by sending an email or posting on our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/ttu.chess

Happy chess! Let us know how we can help. Contact me at al.lawrence@ttu.edu.